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ABSTRACT

The most serious problem affecting education is the poor opinion in which it is held by the public. The uncertain nature of the school's mission, fragmented leadership, and citizen isolation are among the reasons for negative reactions. A shared decision-making process with greater citizen involvement is imperative if schools are to truly regain public respect. Parents, citizens, and students must be included in the process as true partners with the professionals. There must also be a formal mechanism which provides genuine authority for the school council to make decisions affecting the school. School boards and superintendents must delegate a significant portion of their perceived and real prerogatives to that council and devise carefully drawn but not oppressive limits to its authority. (SAS)

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AN IMPERATIVE FOR CHANGE:
A GOAL FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

A Position Paper

National Committee for Citizens in Education
Columbia, Maryland

October 30, 1979

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
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The Failure of the Schools

We at the National Committee for Citizens in Education have long had a love affair with the public schools. We believe the common schools have generally served our nation well, better than any other educational system in the world. This polemic, therefore, is delivered -- to use John Gardner's words -- from "critical lovers," not "unloving critics."

Historically, American public education has been plagued by national crises of potentially catastrophic proportions. The doomsayers have regularly predicted the demise of all public schools and the establishment of some other system, ranging from an Illichican de-schooled society to an elitist private entrepreneurial system.

Those who prophesy doom for the public schools might be compared to those who had the same pessimism about the future of the human race as armaments moved from the crossbow to gunpowder to tanks and airplanes. Perhaps the arms race escalation has now moved to the point where that pessimism is justified because the nuclear capability exists for destruction of most of humanity.

Perhaps also the crisis of confidence, of disenchantment and frustration by a sizable segment of the nation's population with the public schools, is now such that the public schools are indeed at a crossroads and their survival is indeed in doubt.

Tuition tax credits, renewed interest in "parent choice" vouchers, continued decline in public confidence in the schools as reflected in the Gallup-Kettering polls, and fear on the part of parents and staffs alike about the escalating violence in our schools -- these all represent a stockpiling of such serious public school deficiencies that they might really foretell the demise of the public schools as they exist today.

It is no longer just the anti-school, anti-taxes forces which predict the schools' demise, but vast numbers of parents and citizens who are convinced that the public schools are either failing to educate or are miseducating children. This potential collapse of a major public institution comes in the face of incredible historical success. Ralph Tyler, Director Emeritus of the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences, recently said:

> Our confidence in public education should be viewed in an historical and an international perspective. At the time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, only 15% of our adult population was literate. By World War I, that percentage had risen to 35 percent; and by World War II, to 55 percent. In 1979, 80-82 percent of the 17-year-olds who took the National Assessment of Educational Progress had attained basic literacy.

Why, then, is the forecast so dismal, and why are the public schools in such imminent peril? Unresponsiveness to and isolation from the needs of those whom the institution is intended to serve lead directly to all of those factors which have caused the increasing loss of confidence in the public schools. So, basing our analysis on our collective experience and our understanding of the operations of schools, let us hypothesize about some of the major reasons for that potential collapse.

Size: the sheer numbers of students and school systems and persons employed to operate the schools impedes any attempt to serve democratically the clients (students) who need the service. As with most institutions in modern western society, there is a hierarchical layering of personnel; restrictive -- often coercive -- rules and regulations are promulgated, and the bureaucracy expands to serve the needs of the bureaucracy.

Lack of clarity about the schools' mission: too many of those who are operating the schools do not clearly understand the mission of those schools. Too often they lack the skills to develop a community concensus on that mission and to articulate it. The schools, therefore, are reactive and become the scapegoats for the failure of society to solve many social problems.

Lack of forceful leadership: fragmented as it is -- the public school system is 16,000 systems -- public education lacks

national leadership. What leadership there is comes not from charismatic practioners but from scholars at the colleges and universities who are often remote from the problems. Those who claim to speak in behalf of public schools lack the passion of the detractors.

Entrenched power which impedes change: personnel and their organizations within the public school hierarchy and those who have decision-making authority outside the system have assumed or acquired considerable power -- most of it used to protect the status quo or to further limited goals.

In many school districts the school administrators -- the principal, or more often the superintendent -- make the major decisions. Where teacher organizations exist they have a powerful voice through the collective bargaining process. Other groups with influence are the school boards, state departments of education, state boards of education, state legislatures and the federal government. Finally, in recent years the courts have increasingly been called on to arbitrate public school issues. This development generally results from the failure of administrators and school boards to take responsibility for decision making.

All this means that the determinations affecting the education of children are too often made by individuals with the greatest access to information, to dollars, and to the supportive bureaucracy. Decision-making processes are monopolized

by those in power at a particular time and schooling is often in a state of warfare. In short, the present condition of public education bears little resemblance to the traditional picture of a public system responsive to lay control.

Powerlessness of the parent/citizen: it is particularly significant that rarely do parents and citizens, who have little political strength, have any significant voice in school decision making. Moreover, the students, who are the clients, are the least consulted consumer group in the United States according to Harold Howe, II, former United States Commissioner of Education.

An Imperative for Change

This partial litany of reasons for the failure of the public schools is overwhelming. Worse yet, based on past performance, there is little reason to assume that enough of the people now responsible for those schools have either the desire or the skill to make them responsive to the schooling needs of youth.

We at the National Committee for Citizens in Education believe that there is not much time left for the public school system of this country to be dramatically reshaped or it will not, and perhaps should not, continue to exist. That reshaping will not just happen, because too many of those in control of

of the school systems are complacently comfortable and willing to perpetuate the status quo, while those educators who want to make changes are frustrated by the rigidity of the system.

We believe that only with radical changes in governance and a major redirection of public policy over the next five years can the public schools survive. We call our action plan an IMPERATIVE FOR CHANGE. We believe it can work nationally even in our very diverse school "system" which has allowed each community considerable latitude to run the schools as it wants and needs. The change suggested here is intended to, and CAN, fit into each unique system. It will take time and it will take leadership, but fortunately that leadership can come from any source -- schools, community, youth, and/or the political arena.

The IMPERATIVE we call for is a SHARED DECISION-MAKING PROCESS FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION.

It is an imperative because it is in accord with fundamental democratic processes and is key to what we as a nation must be about, what relationships between people are about, and what schooling is about.

It is an imperative because the present state of decision making, based on power, which is generally insensitive to the needs of students, exerted by people insulated from accountability, has not worked and the public schools of this country are in deep trouble.

Implementing the Imperative

For shared decision making to work, two things must happen:

- o Parents, citizens, and students must be included in the process as true partners with the professionals.
- o There must be formal mechanisms for implementing the process at each school.

In a recent paper on governance from the Schools Commission of New South Wales, Australia, entitled, "The Case for School Based Decision Sharing," the authors make a case for the active and meaningful involvement of parents/citizens in the decisions which affect their children:

> The case for participation by parents in the school's decision-making process is based on two fundamental arguments -- one educational, the other political.
>
> Firstly, research reports have repeatedly shown that parents have as powerful an influence on school outcomes, or pupil achievement and success, as any other educational factor, including all the inputs of the school.
>
> . . . The second main argument for including parents in school based decision making is that parents and community members are the true clients of the school.
>
> . . . The charge that most parents are not really interested in participating in school management

> is hard to deny. However, when it is considered that schools for so long have been "fortresses," actively discouraging parental involvement or trivializing it where it is allowed, the cause of the problem becomes apparent.
>
> . . . As to the qualifications of parents to engage in educational decision making, the question should not involve what parents know about the technicalities of education, but what they can come to know. It is no longer the case that teachers have the exclusive competence to formulate educational policy. There is a considerable difference between knowing how to teach effectively and having the sole right to say what the ends of this teaching should be.

The National Committee for Citizens in Education believes that parents and citizens must continue to make every effort to influence policy at the federal, state and local district level. However, their involvement will be most meaningful if they have a voice in what happens in the education of a child attending a particular school.

We believe that whatever happens to reshape schooling must take place where the child is, where the parent/citizen concern exists, and where the teachers and principal can demonstrate their caring -- <u>at the individual school</u>. All else -- board of education resolution, administrative and budget details, state and federal programs and regulations -- have only one purpose: to facilitate what happens at that individual school.

Just calling for and endorsing this concept will not, in itself, create shared decision making at the local school site. There must be a formal mechanism which provides genuine authority

for a school council involving parents, teachers, administrators and students to make decisions affecting that school. School boards and superintendents must delegate a significant portion of their perceived and real prerogatives to that council and devise carefully drawn but not oppressive limits to its authority. Each district can determine its own limits and then the councils must be trusted to make decisions in the best interest of their children.

John I. Goodlad, in a recent article in the Phi Delta Kappan, "Can Our Schools Get Better?" has said:

> . . . that schools will be better if legislators, school board members, parents, and superintendents see themselves as responsible for enhancing the effectiveness, unity, and sense of mission of the single school.

He closes his article by adding:

> . . . Our schools can and should be better. But educators must take the lead, together, to make them so. Large numbers of parents and students are ready to join us, I believe, in making our schools, one by one, better places to live and work. The slogans for improvement are, for the most part, meaningless rhetoric. Our schools must be reconstructed, one by one, by citizens and educators working together. Nothing less will suffice. (Emphasis ours.)

Indeed our schools can and must be better. There will be false starts, reluctant and seemingly uncaring parents, and

resistive school personnel. And those will all be reasons for inaction or reversion to the comfortable, but too often non-educating, ways of the past. We truly need to work toward the elimination of those obstacles. The education or mis-education of a generation of children is at stake.